

## Lapsarianism

The Talmudists had Hillel and Shammai. The Covenanters had the Old Lights and the New Lights. Now it seems there are Infralapsarians and Supralapsarians among the American Reformed folks.

So, what's this big deal?

These parties propose two different sequences for God's decisions to create the world, to permit the fall, and to elect some persons to salvation and others to reprobation. The Supra party insists that first God thought about or made the decree that there would be a group of elect human beings and another group which would not be elect, and from this decision made it all happen. God created the world and then permitting the world to fall into sin.

To the Supra party the election stands prior to the decision to let sin enter creation. In contrast, the Infra party believes that creation of the world came first, then after the decision to allow this world to fall into sin, the decree concerning election and reprobation followed.

Many scholars believe the Canons of Dordt follow the Infra-lapsarian line of thought as well as perhaps all other Reformed creeds. Dordt does contain passages that can only be seen as Infralapsarian on the surface.

Consider this, "chosen, from the whole human race, which had fallen through their own fault, a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ, whom He from eternity appointed the Mediator and head of the elect, and the foundation of salvation" (Head I, article 7). This passage then sees the whole of humanity under consideration after the fall only then does election come into consideration.

We might ask what difference this makes to anyone since it is speculation at best and lies beyond the revealed word of God. While this is a true statement as far as it goes, it will have an effect upon what the theologian sees as the prime motivation of God and that will affect his conclusions worked out in history.

The Supralapsarian begins with two groups and sees creation as the Providential working out of these two groups in history. In contrast, the

Infralapsarian views creation as the beginning point and Providence as God's way of ordering events to bring about His purpose. The Supralapsarian then will have a more-controlled and so-to-speak sovereign God compared to the Infralapsarian who sees Election and Providence as two separate decrees in contrast to the single decree of the Supralapsarian.

We should note that Dordt where the Infralapsarian perspective was perhaps best articulated in the formulation of the creed does not condemn the Supralapsarian. This has

never been a measure of orthodoxy among the Reformed. I do not believe it is possible for either side to prove its position from the Scriptures alone and thus it shouldn't be a do-or-die proposition for membership in Reformed circles.

The vast majority of students "doing" theology in the church have little if any interest in this debate. Some think this produces an attitude of intellectual arrogance in which the proponent of either view presumes to see into the very will of God. Others believe both parties are engaging in the error of believing that logic can probe the mind of God and this is an example of logic running rampant.

Herman Hoeksema argued that these positions were not fundamentally about the order of God's decrees. Instead, Hoeksema suggested that the core distinction was between purpose and means. In this light, what is subordinate and what is the main object?

The issue isn't new and it refuses to go away. Theologians of varied stripes have dealt with this question through the ages and it remains on the table in the 20th Century. Consider how the issue moves across the historical and philosophical spectrum.

Karl Barth declared God's prime purpose was that: He Himself, His glory, and especially His mercy and justice should be revealed among men and to men by means of salvation of some and damnation of others. To this proper divine will and decree of God everything else is subordinate, as an interrelated means to its accomplishment. This Barth saw as the Supralapsarian position. He continued that the Infralapsarian position was less precise in its formulation. According to Barth while both insist that God's eternal purpose is to reveal and glorify Himself, the Infralapsarian doesn't provide the details of this statement, refusing to claim any exact knowledge as to content or reason behind God's primal plan.

In an earlier age David Hume objected to both parties on the basis of the moral content of the issues and wrote a long endnote to his *Natural History of Religion*, pulling much of his material it appears from Chevalier Ramsay. Hume claims Ramsay was no enemy of Christianity but from his own statements Ramsay was also no Calvinist.

William E. Channing the champion of American Unitarianism in an 1820 essay, "The Moral Argument Against Calvinism" set forth the moral argument at length, reaching the conclusion that the God of the Calvinist does things that would shock the moral convictions of man and if this were the pattern after which we were made, we would be monsters.

Thus the issue has not been confined to Reformed circles, though perhaps it is there that it has had the most consequence in the complete theologies of the whole Reformed church. Some see the issue as the why of how things are played out in the societies of men, especially concerning the reprobate.

Both sides agree God has a fundamental "ruling passion" which is self-glorification. Each party takes a distinct route from this common point to demonstrate how that will be

worked out in God's plan of self-glorification as pertains to His creating and redeeming designs.

Herman Bavinck, a formative influence on Hoeksema, clarified the issue by noting that the Supra-lapsarians "subsume all the other decrees under Predestination, while Infralapsarians emphasizes the manyness of the decrees."

Now consider how the issue develops in Scottish theology. The Westminster catechisms both begin with the same question and answer: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever." In these discussions God's glory surfaces often. What are we to make of God's glory then? Our answer here demands that Presbyterians enter the discussion.

The Supralapsarian position is well stated by Hoeksema who sees God as One who is self-centered and consecrated to Himself, He seeks and finds Himself in love. God is attracted by Himself and graciously deposed to Himself. He is charmed by His loveliness. He delights in His own infinite beauty. This would mean that God's apparent consciousness directed toward others is in fact contemplation of the contents of His own self-contained being. Thus the satisfaction God derives from the final glorified estate of the elect is in fact a delight in His own holiness. Since the church achieves its holiness only in Christ, both the subject and the object of God's contemplation of the holiness of the elect is properly understood to be located within the life of the divine Trinity (Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 112, 126-127, 614-615).

Bavinck in contrast said we are to be warned not to assume that God in the eternal state of the reprobate reveals His justice exclusively, nor in the eternal state of the elect manifests His mercy exclusively he finds sparks of justice revealed in the church purchased with the blood of the Son and sparks of divine mercy in hell since there are degrees of punishment. Bavinck saw God's self-glorifying as more than a self-contemplation, but containing an other-directed example or teaching element (pedagogical). Bavinck then saw the unfolding of the decrees being as rich and varied as the creation itself in the unfolding of its history (Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 387, 391).

This summary is overly simplified and condensed more than even Readers Digest would attempt, but I hope all can see the issue isn't merely a presentation of Calvinist versus Hyper-Calvinist and that we have both Calvinists and other Protestants on both sides.

We may choose to avoid such discussions in the every day life of the church. However I believe that dealing with this issue will bring theology to a sharper focus and enable all to better articulate the Reformed faith.

Being unable to engage the world in meaningful discussion of these issues has caused some to turn from the Reformed faith. Many anti-Calvinist statements were born in this predawn theory. Barth dealt with this struggle at some length and identified problems

with both views but acknowledged the need to understand and rightly present this self-glorifying of God as it is played out in history.

If indeed we agree that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, perhaps we should seek to understand this foundational theory. Can we go there? In my opinion we have already and, with the door open, we must control the animal we have released.

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